



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



Topic: Safer Federal Workplace

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Dates of Presentation: June 8, 2021

Session Links:

- [National Customer Engagement Contacts](#)
- [GSA COVID-19 website](#) for Emergency Response Activities
- [GSA's Safer Federal Workplace](#) Portal - procedures and guidance for GSA Owned and Leased Buildings, Projects and Workplaces

As science of the pandemic has evolved, how has the CDC guidance on service cleaning and ventilation changed?

Answer - At the start of the pandemic, the CDC recommended routine cleaning and disinfection of high touch services. In early 2021, the CDC conducted a review of epidemiologic investigations, experimental research, and risk modeling reports throughout the pandemic. Based on the evidence, the CDC determined that the risk of transmission from surfaces is low in community settings. Cleaning products containing soap or detergent can be effective for removing it from surfaces. Given this relatively low risk and the effectiveness of cleaners at removing viruses from surfaces, the CDC recommends using cleaning products instead of disinfectants in routine situations. In office buildings or other community settings, the CDC recommends cleaning and disinfecting surfaces when there has been a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the space within the last 24 hours. Additionally, people may choose to increase the frequency of cleaning or use of disinfectants, if certain higher risk conditions exist such as: high community transmission of the virus, low vaccination rates, infrequent hand hygiene, or if the space is used by people at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. On the ventilation (HVAC) front, the importance of

PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



ventilation and key prevention measures has become a little bit more clear. The CDC finds itself responding to requests for more nuanced guidance. The uncertainties early on mostly surrounded the unknowns regarding which of those infectious sources resulted in transmission. However, the strategies for controlling those sources remain the same. These control strategies consistently included enhanced filtration, directional airflows and deactivation via UVGI (ultra-violet germicidal irradiation). CDC has tried to clarify that guidance through the use of frequently asked questions (FAQs). Most of these FAQs were based on questions and feedback from the public that included, or indicated whether additional how-to information was necessary.

Can you tell us how GSA's guidance has impacted employees and agencies over the course of this pandemic?

Answer - Since the early days of the pandemic, we have always followed, or tried to follow, all of the CDC guidance as it has evolved and expanded. The few exceptions were instances of slight adjustment to the guidance, specific to GSA operations. We have been following CDC guidance since early 2020 and continue to follow it as it evolves. That includes early guidance for regular cleaning and disinfecting before it was clear that infection risk from surface transmission is low. GSA has assessed our ventilation (HVAC) and plumbing systems and made adjustments to operations, in line with CDC guidance and where feasible, to increase dilution ventilation and filtration for all of our buildings. We continue to assess and make adjustments to these HVAC systems. On the plumbing side, we have also taken to heart the fact that in many of our buildings where we have low occupancy, there is a possibility that the water systems can become stagnant. Using both CDC guidance and valuable input from EPA, we have enacted a continued process of flushing our plumbing systems on a regular basis and monitoring them to make sure we are continually getting fresh water in our buildings.



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



What do you believe is the most important information to prepare people for coming back to the workplace office?

Answer - Really, it's important to remember that COVID-19 spreads mainly through close contact for a person to person. People should protect themselves and others in the workplace by getting vaccinated. Stay home if they have or think they have COVID-19. Wear a mask and stay six feet away from others if they are not fully vaccinated, and also wash hands often and cover coughs and sneezes. These are frequent things we should be doing to protect our health and the health of others. From a cleaning and disinfection perspective, it is important to remember that in most situations, contracting COVID-19 from touching services is low, but regular cleaning is still good for maintaining a healthy facility. The other important thing is what people are feeling when they come back to the workplace. One of the most important things is for leadership to communicate clearly, what they have done to mitigate those risks. Including etiquette and clear direction on standards of behavior. I think that is going to go a long way to helping people feel comfortable coming back to work.

Will you be able to work with Agency Requirements for Technology?

Answer - Federal agencies can procure a wide range of technology and other products and services through GSA. Visit the [GSA Technology](#) webpage for additional resources.

Can you help me better understand the steps GSA is taking to help prepare and maintain my Federal workplace so we can safely resume work in our federally owned and leased locations?

Answer - You can find detailed information about our activities on our "[Safer Federal Workplace](#)" website available at <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/emergency-response/safer-federal-workplace>



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



Which elements of the current CDC guidance on cleaning and disinfection and ventilation make good sense to continue for businesses, in your professional opinion?

Answer - From a cleaning and disinfection perspective, you should continue cleaning of high touch services. We recommend following these protocols especially if someone has been sick. If you suspect somebody is positive, we have guidance for additional measures. Several of the improvements relate to having a good ventilation system to begin with. We are talking about systems that are going to be code compliant in regards to providing the outdoor air to the occupied zone. As well as some systems that distribute the air in a way that minimizes still pockets of stagnant air. There are also opportunities to actively implement strategies. Some building owners and operators may choose to evaluate their populations. Trying to identify whether or not some areas offer a higher risk. When those areas are identified, we recommend directional airflows. Those can be incorporated into the design plan upfront

Thinking about any future risk, are there any emerging things that we learn from the pandemic that might prove beneficial moving forward?

Answer - There's already indications that there is going to be greater emphasis placed on that code compliance baseline. On design requirements that incorporate the capacity or enhance protective HVAC operations, for those uses or circumstances when they require. You may not need enhanced filtration every day of the year, but if your system is designed with the capacity already built into it to upgrade as circumstances arise, then that is an example of having that enhanced capacity. There may also be some additional technologies that are going to be born out of the innovation we have seen during the pandemic. Additional air cleaners or air treatment devices and so forth that may prove to come forth and help us in a more energy efficient manner. Good air quality is



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



good for humans regardless of the state of the pandemic. Especially if you have allergies, these are things that are always good. Whether you are just starting to invest in them now or have been investing in good air quality for a while, it is something we will all stand to benefit from.

Have the requirements for HVAC been updated in request for lease proposals?

Answer - The existing contract language requires that the building owner or the building manager maintain compliance with the default standard for air quality in a building (ASHRAE 62.1). That's the way we manage our own federal buildings too. When the pandemic came along, we sent out notices to our leased facilities managers to advise them that we trust they are following current CDC guidance for ventilation and EPA guidance for drinking water in their buildings. Obviously, for those leased facilities, we don't have direct control to the same extent we have for federal facilities. They are privately owned. We can't go in and do the same kinds of direct alterations or changes or upgrades that we can, at least not as easily. The ASHRAE 62.1 indoor air quality standard has evolved over time to ensure good general air quality for buildings. Our contract requirements for our lease buildings and delegated buildings include meeting ASHRAE 62.1 on how to maintain the ventilation systems.

Beyond physical changes to the work environment, what other considerations would make employees feel more safe and comfortable returning to the office?

Answer - One of the main things is making those cleaning practices visible. Air is really invisible to the individual. The changes that are made at the building level aren't obvious. We struggle with this in healthcare. We struggle to communicate safety and wellness and health quality and efficacy. In many cases, we do that through cleaning. There's several studies that demonstrate the quality of the environment and cleaning cues up the notion that if you take care of this, you



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



have taken care of other things too. There is this perceptual piece that is important. Not certainly to suggest that we descend into hygiene theater, but it is important that we do clean, in understanding people's concerns. I think one really good way to do that is anonymous surveys or inquiries to find out what staff and occupant concerns are. Then clearly communicate how you address these concerns when you have narrowed it down to the big ones.

What new habits or patterns or cultural shifts do you hope we retain from 2020?

Answer - One thing I have really appreciated is that we have gotten a glimpse into each other's homes. We used to show up to work and we were this person network without recognizing our outside lives. I have one thing to add which is sort of health-related. That is that, you know, the early days of COVID, you saw a huge drop in carbon emissions. A lot of that was because we were involved in spending all of this time driving to work. I think that should become part of our everyday patterns. As a strategy to reduce carbon emissions to try to help the planet as well the workplace.

Can you tell us what GSA has done to prepare us as a returning workforce?

Answer - We have done quite a bit. From the very beginning of the pandemic, in terms of maintaining our facilities and introducing signage and doing regular cleaning and disinfection, and also monitoring our ventilation and plumbing systems, specifically reposted signage in our buildings to remind occupants about things like good hygiene practices and social distancing. There's other kinds of signage and markings that have been posted on our buildings about elevator usage to try to encourage people to still maintain distance even though we have a pretty decent vaccination rate in the country. Those things are still important for general safety reasons. Then, as I mentioned also, earlier, plumbing systems are being flushed and checked. We have adjusted our guidance internally according to evolving CDC guidance over the last 15 months.



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



There has been a lot of discussion around the effectiveness of UV lights. Do UV lights kill the COVID-19 virus? Or is this a myth? If so, is this something we should think about?

Answer- See the [CDC's Ventilation in Buildings Guidance](#), which answers this question directly as far as effectiveness. The short answer is yes. There is another webpage on UV 101 that you can click on as well. There's quite a bit more information. The short answer is yes, it will work. As far as considering the discussion on those kinds of scenarios, it would be more appropriate, perhaps, to consider having that code compliant baseline that is working well before you start going down other paths such as UVGI.

How are GSA Lease Administration Managers (LAMs) verifying Lessors are following through with what GSA has prescribed?

Answer- LAMs are representatives within GSA Property Management, responsible for the day-to-day monitoring of leases and lease contracts. They are kind of like a contracting officer's representative in a sense. They normally go out to all of the leases at least once a year and quite often twice a year just to check on how things are doing. They are constantly checking whether the building owner is complying with the terms of the contract and there are specific things in there that support safety and health of the contracts as well. They have also been actively involved since last year in checking on the leases and providing the communication. When I mentioned earlier that we sent out letters to the building owners, reminding them of the CDC guidance for ventilation and water systems monitoring, the LAMs were integral in that effort. This becomes even more significant as people start to move back into buildings.

Another piece of communication you will see is letting our agency partners know that when you are ready to move back into a facility, by all means, let GSA know. That way, we can provide more and specific information about the buildings in question, ensure everything is running properly and address any concerns agencies have.



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



Another question that came in from a couple folks about leases had to do with cleaning. In addition to ventilation, we also reached out to our leased building owners regarding cleaning. We switched from standard cleaning to doing cleaning and disinfection. With COVID related cleaning, that was all shared as well. In fact, we modified our leases to make sure that they were doing regular disinfecting and wiping of high touch surfaces.

What one thing can have the biggest impact on making employees feel more safe and comfortable in the next phases of work?

Answer- We need to make sure that workplaces are safe for people to come back to. Beyond that, we need to start thinking about considering the health of the holistic human being. I have heard stress being called the secondary pandemic because we were already living in a stressful world. This is just amplified for so many different reasons. Thinking about fostering wellness inside and outside the workspace, how do we reduce that stress on an individual level? Also, how do we design the space to foster wellness? What do we need to be thinking about from a cultural standpoint to support wellness? Doing that in a way that is inclusive and thinking about the different ways that we show up to the office. I would also think about this idea that we need to be able to show up and voice our opinions. How do we foster that idea of psychological safety, diversity, inclusion, and considering humans as a whole, full entities? Inclusion is most definitely a part of us. We have considered the needs and concerns of all peoples including things like what disease they may have, et cetera. We know that in healthcare, the way that we approach any sort of issue, that there are multiple steps along the path, along the way to getting that wellness we are looking for. Which, again, is a key part of everything I have heard from any federal employee I have ever spoken to has spoken about the mission. The mission is about keeping all of us safe and healthy which starts with my personal behavior.



PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



With some people who are not getting vaccinated, going back into the office will social distancing still be implemented?

Answer- The guidance does develop as we get more information on how it looks to reoccupy spaces and hear from partners. You know, I would just say stay tuned. The CDC is always looking at the evidence and the feedback from partners for what things look like. Whatever is on that website right now is the guidance. I don't really have information on how that's going to change anytime soon. We will let you know when we hear more.

Are there situations or activities that enhance the virus spread within office space? Either by an individual's inaction or facility staff actions or inactions?

Answer- The CDC put out a science brief on transmission. Basically, what they said was that proximity is still a major player. In terms of protecting yourself, certainly avoiding places that are highly congested or something like that to the extent that you can, that is a self-control kind of scenario. Facilities or areas where there is stagnant air. If you have high concentration of people and insufficient ventilation airflow, that is a scenario that has an impact on transmission. Then, on the responsibility of that person who might be feeling just a little bit under the weather and not sure whether to go in or not, we discussed that earlier, and the ability of that person to go ahead and stay home and perhaps telework as opposed to going in and putting others at complete risk. The primary consideration is staying home when you are ill and making it possible to do that is really the best way.

Can we require employees to be vaccinated?

Answer- We cannot require our employees to be vaccinated to return to the workplace.

When will GSA be adding minimum ventilation? Will this be automatically added to all contracts in the future?

PBS Customer Forum Series – Q & A



Answer- For both federal and leased buildings, moving forward, we are requiring that the ventilation filtration be capable of handling greater filtration efficiency such as MERV-13. The lease contracts already say that they have to meet ASHRAE- 62. The new federal buildings are the same way. That covers a whole group of ventilation requirements that are intended to provide good air quality in general. Also, for new federal building construction, we are putting in the requirement to allow for greater filtration capacity. Not a whole lot of change, but it's an important change moving forward. That means new buildings will have the capacity for greater filtration.